

Using Debates in Online Courses for Greater Engagement: When Arguing Improves Trust

TREO Talk Paper

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Abstract

During Fall 2014, 5.7 million students enrolled in online courses, which accounted for about 28.5 percent of all college students (NCES, 2014). However, online education is seeing large attrition rates, for huge online courses these go as high as 90 percent, and even smaller-scale online courses see higher attrition rates than face-to-face courses (New York Times, 2013). Some evidence shows that courses delivered solely online may be fine for highly skilled, highly motivated students, but they are inappropriate for struggling students (New York Times, 2013). A five-year study, issued in 2011, tracked 51,000 community college students and found that those who took higher proportions of online courses were less likely to earn degrees or transfer to four-year colleges (New York Times, 2013). Interestingly, students in hybrid classes performed as well academically as those in traditional classes (New York Times, 2013) presumably pointing to the importance of at least some level of richness and contact using various cues.

Beyond education, there is an increased use of distributed teams in organizations, consisting of geographically, temporally, and even organizationally dispersed members (Carmel & Agarwal, 2001). However, due to impersonal communication media, the social context is often missing in such teams (Sproull & Keisler, 1986). Organizational literature also provides some insights into what factors help lead to greater cohesion among team members and overall satisfaction when working on projects, and trust has consistently been shown to play a significant role (Cohen & Bailey 1997, McNab et al. 2012).

The challenge then is to create online environments that foster trust, cohesion and engagement. The goal of the project is to allow students in an online course to create bonds and form groups that will help them transcend distance and quickly create trust and cohesion. The use of online debates performed using video conferencing technology will be explored as a possible vehicle for addressing this challenge. Video conferencing allows for the sharing of multiple and richer social cues, while debates require great preparation and can be considered a rigorous assignment showcasing multitude of students' skills. An exploratory study was conducted using a convenience sample of 28 MBA students

Analysis of 27 valid responses showed increased levels of trust, increased levels of "knowing each other", even higher rating of knowing the professor. The students furthermore rated the assignment as enjoyable and one they would recommend to others. While it is not possible to speak of statistical significance with such a small sample size, these differences were observed after single conference call that lasted only about 30 minutes. Of course, there are several limitations for this study, especially related to the small sample size. Further research into the topic could be meaningful as it might improve classroom retention at the same time engage students in active and integrative learning.

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